

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah – Day 1 – Choosing to Choose

Mi Yichiyeh, Umi Yamut, Who will live and who will die? It is the central question of these Days of Awe, which we will chant for the first time in a few minutes after we put the Torah away and recite the musaf prayers including the haunting *Une-Tanetokef* poem that gives us so much of the imagery we use for these Days of Awe – God as a shepherd reviewing and designating the future for his flock, being written in the book of life and so on. The traditional imagery and interpretation of the *Une-Tane Tokef* tefilla is that only God, the Creator, has the answer.

However, earlier this year I realized a very different interpretation, inspired by the death of Elaine Herzberg in March. Elaine was walking her bicycle across the street in Tempe, Arizona when she was hit by a car and later died of her injuries. Her death made headlines. Why? People get hit by cars all the time. But this car had no driver – it was a prototype autonomous Uber taxi, a self-driving car. Research suggests that self-driving cars will reduce accidents by about 90%, an amazing number, but Elaine was the first of the other 10%. And as I read an article I came across these words, “Whom shall a vehicle save - and whom shall it harm - when an accident is unavoidable?” [The Globe and Mail, 2/2/18] In other words, “*Mi Yichiyeh, Umi Yamut*, Who will live and who will die?” But it’s not God answering that question – it’s a car. I had chills as I read all the ethical questions our cars might be making in the future, such as this scenario – what if a child jumps suddenly into the car’s path from the curb. There’s no time to brake. What should the car do then? Veer left into oncoming traffic, possibly causing an accident that would injure the people in the car or the other lane? Veer right onto the sidewalk, possibly injuring pedestrians? Continue straight, colliding with the child? What would we **want** the car to do?

My chills turned to horror when I realized that these are the same types of ethical questions we are in fact answering all the time, and we hardly give it a second thought. Everyday we are the driver deciding ethical questions of life and death and we don’t even recognize it. Rather than choose to choose we choose to stay unaware of our responsibility.

My kids have this great book by Mo Willems – Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus. It’s adorable. Basically the reader is told by the bus driver not to let the pigeon drive the bus and the rest of the book is the pigeon begging to drive the bus. No matter

how tempting, you are supposed to say no. I never thought much of the deeper meaning of the book, but I think the bus is life and letting the pigeon drive the bus is not making sure we are consciously steering it ourselves. My friends, we are all letting the pigeon drive the bus and it's a scary ride!

Of course, "Who shall live and who shall die," is ultimately in God's hands – that's not news. What the Une-Tanah Tokef prayer is actually asking is a question for you and for me. Who do *we* raise up and who do *we* put down? *Une-Tanektokef* demands that we recognize *our own* responsibility for life and death; for well being and suffering; for how our actions or inaction impact others. We need to make sure we are driving the bus.

Judaism is, at its very core, a religion that respects the value of every human being. We derive it from the Creation story we celebrate today, as it is told in Bereshit. We are told that God made humans *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God; that all human beings are equal because they are made in God's image, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, sexual or gender preference, whether they are born in the United States of America or Mexico or Afghanistan, whether they are wealthy or poor, pampered or hardened, whether they have all the same capabilities as you.

And even though we *know* this, we are not good at living it. How is it that we witness suffering and do nothing? How can we see hunger and homelessness and turn our backs? How can we witness people fleeing persecution as we Jews have had to do so many times and wash our hands of it? We choose to ignore and let fate make the decision for us and for them, rather than consciously choosing to get involved in the ethical dilemmas before us all the time. How do we make it different? How do we see the trials of others and rush to help a fellow creature, as we hope someone would do for us in the same situation?

Is it that we are callous or cruel or blind to the demeaning of humanity all around us? Could it be we just don't care? I certainly hope not. Could it be we don't know what to do to help or are overwhelmed by the enormity of the task? Maybe. Could it be that we are scared? Almost definitely – scared to fail, scared to face our own biases, scared to endanger ourselves.

But it doesn't have to be like that. We can be brave. What does bravery look like? It can look like the work of IsraAid on the Greek Island of Lesbos not far from Turkey. Right now, a group of medical professionals and trauma specialists, a mix of

Israeli Jews, Muslims and Christians is awaiting the next raft to float perilously across the straits from Turkey.

When it arrives Dr. Iris Adler, Dr. Tali Shaltiel, nurse Majeda Kardosh, team leader Manal Shehadi and others will wade into the water, grab the boat and start helping people off. There are babies screaming, grown-ups who can barely walk. They are afraid of the water, afraid of the rocks; they are cold and near-starving. Manal starts shouting in Arabic, “Who needs a doctor, who needs a doctor?” And the triage starts.

Who are these people on the raft? Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the region. And who are these doctors, nurses and trauma specialists waiting for them when they cross the narrow waters from the Turkish mainland to the Greek Island of Lesbos? Israeli volunteers for IsraAid, a non-political, non-profit organization that operates all over the world helping people of all backgrounds. Why are these Israelis helping those who would otherwise be their enemies? Because the refugees are human beings who need help and IsraAid volunteers have the capacity to give it – food, medicine, blankets and comfort. They have chosen to open their eyes to the suffering and lives will literally be saved through their efforts.

Compare that approach to the policy of child separation at the US border or the issue of African refugees inside Israel right now living in limbo. Which approach do you think our faith tells us to emulate, which does the Torah teach us to support? We here are familiar enough to know that these countries are inherently good, but we still need to hold them accountable for bad policies when they occur.

It is not that we are supposed to put ourselves in danger in order to help others, nor however are we free to ignore the needs of others for our own comfort. The Talmud teaches [Nedarim 80b] that if a town has a spring and it needs the water of the spring in order to live, it does not have to share with a neighboring town even if *they* need that water to live. However, if the town with the spring only needs the water to do its laundry and the next town over needs it to live, then they must share. So, which are we? Are we afraid for our lives or afraid for our laundry, afraid of physical harm or afraid of financial cost?

What does it mean to go out of our way to recognize the humanity in others? What does it mean to make ourselves aware of and to accept the responsibility we mark on this anniversary of creation, *Mi Yichiyeh, Umi Yamut*, Who will live and who will die?

On a macro scale it could mean researching issues like immigration and refugees so that you can decide for yourself on the best way to help those in need and fleeing persecution as our ancestors did not long ago. Or recognizing the discrimination, racism and lack of concern for the poor inherent in the Flint, Michigan water crisis and working to address those issues there and closer to home where we know these are still serious issues. Or even simply refusing to laugh at a joke you know is offensive even if it seems like the thing to do in the moment, especially if it is at the expense of minorities who have less power in our society and suffer rampant cultural inequalities. Our role needs to be to stand up and change that culture, not play along.

On a local level it means coming and volunteering here at NEST, when we turn this place into a homeless shelter for a week, and then finding a way to be involved with helping our local homeless the other 51 weeks of the year too. It means coming and reading with the students in the Park Place School that we house. It means remembering that those less fortunate than us, in any number of ways, or those who are different from us, are no less of a person than us and we should do all we can to help them.

You may have noticed the booklet in your seatbacks – Jewels of Elul vol. 12. It is my New Year’s gift to you and we will use them during *Musaf* today and tomorrow and then you can take them home for inspiration or to share. There is a jewel for each day of Elul, the Jewish month leading up to today. I want to tell you about one of these stories now. It is the story of Reverend Cecil Murray who went to visit Rwanda after the genocide there. He was visiting an organization that served women survivors. Most lost their whole families and endured horrific sexual violence. Many were dying of AIDS. Some were mothers whose only living children were born of rape. During a healing service there, Rev. Murray walks to the front of the room. He takes out a newish, pink Rwandan Franc. He holds it between his two hands and asks, “how much is this worth?”

The women pause with looks of puzzlement. After all, they were told he was a religious leader of great esteem in the U.S., yet he’s asking them a plainly obvious question. They indulge him and reply, “5,000 francs.” He holds it in his hands and then dramatically crumples it, stomps on it, and dirties it on the floor. He even tears the corner and spits on it. He holds it between his two hands again, “And now, how much is it worth?” The women reply, “it’s still worth 5,000 francs;” their discomfort and confusion hang in the air. Rev. Murray explains, “And so are you. Nothing you have experienced, nothing anyone has done to you, can change your value. You are still worth the same.”

It doesn't matter what you or someone else has been through, you are human; they are human. It doesn't matter where someone was born, you are human; they are human. It doesn't matter their faith, their language, their preferences, their abilities, you are human; they are human. Today we must declare our dedication to consciously choosing life, not just for us or our own, but for all in need. We need to not just take the wheel but also recognize the power and responsibility that comes with it. That is the demand of the *Une-Taneh Tokef* poem we read today. Who will live and who will die – it is in your hands my friends. Recognize the power you have there! Let us look at the world with eyes recalibrated for the primacy of humanity and let us recognize that God judges us this season not by the value we place on ourselves, but by the value we place on others. And may we be worthy of the Book of Life.

L'Shanah Tovah.